

# E-LEARNING




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The answer is blended learning, now what was the question again?

The term *blended learning* has been the most overused buzzword in the learning industry over the past couple of years, but it has, in fact, always been the way that training has been provided. Technically speaking, any combination of delivery methods is a blended learning solution, such as an instructor-led session coupled with take-home workbooks. Elliott Masie refers to a session he did via phone with PowerPoint slides he'd sent ahead as an example of technology-driven blended learning. As far back as 1996, Pete Weaver of DDI was evangelizing technology-driven blended learning through presentations titled, *The Magic Is in the Mix*.

So, just what is all of the fuss about?

For most organizations, a robust blended approach should maximize the ROI potential of a complete curriculum. To prove that, a Thomson NETg study published earlier this year found that a structured curriculum of blended learning will generate a 30 percent increase in performance accuracy and a 41 percent increase in performance speed over single-method delivery options.  Thomson Job Impact Study" (June T+D) New technologies have enabled companies to explore novel and creative ways to mix and match delivery methods to learning needs. Given what we now know about how people learn and what employees need to be successful, organizations are excitedly experimenting with these different methods, searching for combinations that provide for the greatest increases in workforce productivity.

There isn't a vendor or training department that wouldn't say it is providing blended learning today, but confusion from the myriad of different and new technologies has kept most sup-

pliers and training functions from truly maximizing the potential of this approach. Bluntly, most organizations haven't matched the right delivery methods to learners' needs.

To help your company design, develop, and deploy blended learning solutions that can increase productivity, drive revenue, and support individual development, let's explore a sample blended learning scenario and six best-practice components needed for successful blended learning solutions.

## A sample blended scenario

*Sue has been a sales rep for the past six years and has participated in many training courses to more effectively sell her company's products and services. Sue likes to receive the core of her training before she's ready to use it, but she also has come to rely on print and her company's intranet to find the information she needs. However, she often can't find that information when she needs it. Like most salespeople, she thinks classroom training takes her away too long from making sales. What she likes about instructor-led training is that she learns as much during lunch and hallway conversations with other salespeople as she does in class. Learning through collaborating with and observing others is not only important to her, but it's also enjoyable.*

You probably know a lot of people like Sue. She has different learning needs at different times. Let's look at three sample paths that, when combined, provide an effective blended learning approach.

**Path A: Formal preparation training.** Let's assume the company is rolling out one of its most significant products in the past several years. To get the

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salesforce up-to-speed quickly and all grounded in the same basic information, the training department prepared a structured, core set of learning activities for Sue and the rest of the salesforce.

Sue's first exposure to the new product is a "Just the Facts" knowledge document, a set of marketing materials that have been repurposed and that provide her with a quick overview and a cheat-sheet she can print out. Next up is a 20-minute introductory Webinar. This second exposure to key information appeals to Sue; hearing and seeing a presentation by a top sales producer is usually worthwhile. Once completed, the presentation will be edited and enhanced,

her mastery of the material. The final task in this structured portion of the curriculum is for Sue to demonstrate to her manager that she's well prepared to sell the new product. She spends 15 minutes on the telephone telling her manager how she would handle a challenging prospect.

Sue has undoubtedly received more training in this blended sequence of activities than in previous product trainings, and it's probably taken less than half the time and has barely interfered with her sales responsibilities. Of course, this formal curriculum didn't cover all of the bases. She recognizes that she has more to learn and will be getting those needs met through infor-

needs in the product documentation, she sends off a request for more detail using her company's Ask the Expert program. Based on Sue's time constraints, the ability to contact other employees in real time, observe how others are addressing similar problems, and being able to ask an expert for help turns out to be more beneficial to Sue than attending a class.

**Path C: Just-in-time, just-enough performance support.** In the past, quickly finding the support materials Sue needs when she needs them has typically been a frustrating experience. Today, however, Sue accesses the intranet and uses the company's information management system to—within minutes—view, save,

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including the addition of questions and answers gathered during the session and posted on the intranet that same afternoon. That provides sales staff who missed the Webinar with the ability to launch the presentation and receive credit through the LMS.

Ready to drill into the product details, Sue registers for the online course, completing the 45-minute training in two separate sessions. She's given the choice to take an in-depth training track or a condensed overview version. The track provides detailed information on all aspects of the new product, a pre-test that enables her to skip areas in which she's already proficient, and a post-assessment that will allow her to assess

mal learning activities and just-in-time performance support materials.

**Path B: Support of informal learning.** Shortly after the new product launch, Sue's regional manager asks the reps to share their best-practice approaches to a common sales challenge. He does that through a threaded discussion, to which reps are asked, but not required, to comply. Because Sue prefers to observe and reuse what has worked well for others, this is an especially effective forum.

Days later in getting ready for a customer call, Sue searches the knowledge database to look up possible strategies for overcoming a technology incompatibility she knows this customer will ask about. When unable to locate what she

and print such items as competitor kill sheets, product specifications, and other reference documentation. A "Key Links" document lets Sue quickly locate new product materials scattered across the corporate intranet. And though she never thought of instant messaging as anything other than a social toy for her teenage daughters, it has become a real help to her when she's on a conference call with a prospect and needs an immediate answer to a question.

Currently, most companies aren't providing that level of blended learning, but this scenario is within reach. This type of robust blended training and support is possible through a well-thought-out approach using available

technologies. Several organizations have already begun deploying aspects of those three paths.

### Best practices in blended

In deploying blended learning, here are six best practices that are important to creating an effective solution.

1. **Create a structured core curriculum of learning activities transferred via different delivery methods.** Just about everybody needs to interact with content more than once in order to really understand and be able to use it. This contact preferably happens in a variety of delivery formats that meet the learner's day-to-day learning requirements. A well-thought-out formal curriculum encompassing different delivery formats is more effective and time efficient. In terms of blended learning, such formal learning activities will probably include a combination of Web-based courseware, ILT, virtual Webinars, enhanced knowledge documents, and mentoring. For some learning objectives, live (synchronous and co-located) events may be required. For instance, in our sales example, Sue and her colleagues might learn a new sales presentation for a product launch best by working in small groups to practice, critique, and refine their presentation skills under the guidance of a sales or product mentor.

2. **Support an environment in which people can learn in small chunks.** To obtain significant performance improvement in the workplace, you must provide a learning environment that addresses real-world learning needs and work-driven requirements. The "one size fits all" approach has never, and will never, work. Most people learn better in small chunks—not in lengthy, information overload training sessions.

3. **Create a system through which people can learn informally.** It's common knowledge that most of what people learn for doing their jobs, they learn

informally through over-the-cubicle conversations or by observation. That informal method of learning needs to be embraced rather than discouraged, especially in an environment like sales, where new best practices are constantly emerging. Technologies such as "ask the expert" functionality, instant messaging, and threaded discussion enable workers to gain valuable insight from co-workers. This type of learning happens faster than formal learning and is usually more readily believable and accepted by the workforce.

4. **Provide an information management repository.** Because just about everybody needs to review learning content more than once to "get it," the repository will be the place where anyone can view or print just-enough, just-in-time information, reference documents, and other performance support materials to help them do their day-to-day jobs.

5. **Provide your development team with a comprehensive set of tools.** It's challenging to create an environment that adequately supports formal, informal, and just-in-time performance support. The best way to identify the required tool set is to match the content development need with the right tool. Ideally, the team should have an easy-to-use tool set that can create Web-based courseware, publish performance support materials, repurpose and enhance existing content, support instructor-led training, and provide live synchronous events.

In some ways, selecting a set of development tools is similar to buying a home entertainment system. You might get better individual quality if you buy each piece separately. But, commonly, after spending a great deal of time to get

everything working together, few people are able to use the system of development tools effectively. On the other hand, integrated home entertainment systems are built to work seamlessly and are usually up and running and producing a high-quality experience quickly. Keep the ease of integration of development components in mind when looking at the right tools as it becomes particularly important in a multiple delivery environment.

6. **Build a shared development environment.** The Delphi Group found that 7 to 20 percent of employees' time on the job is spent replicating existing solutions for others. To avoid that, a company looking to develop learning in-house needs a central system to store, organize, and manage documentation, reusable learning objects, and assets, as well as facilitate communication and support during the development process. That will significantly reduce development time and help maintain a consistent, high level of instructional quality.

As long as technology and delivery formats are optimized for the situation, blended learning is usually the right answer for a company seeking to benefit from a complete mix of training and support that will give its employees what they need, when they need it. Expanding the mix to include a rich variety of formal training; support for informal learning; and easy-to-find, just-in-time performance support will provide your staff with a learning environment that should create "magic from the mix."

Email your questions on e-learning to be answered in future articles to

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